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ABSTRACT

This document discusses increasing public interest in education and the image problem educational research has with the public. Educational research and development is a new field which is still finding its way. The following recommendations can help meet the general public's expectations and establish a more productive relationship with users: (a) current research must address itself to critical issues; (b) greater efforts should be made to include users in early stages of conceptualization; (c) research should be structured in an appropriate time frame; (d) the researcher should not try to provide users with instant answers. Since many users cannot wait five to ten years for recommendations, the researcher must take a realistic approach to the design of the study, and let the user know how much time will be necessary to complete it; (e) finally, researchers should write concise reports that can be easily understood by school personnel and other users. (PB)

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EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST \*

T. H. Bell  
U.S. Commissioner of Education

It says much about the drawing power of the American Educational Research Association that 4,500 members from all over the country -- even some members from abroad -- have come to Washington to attend AERA's annual meeting during the Easter holiday.

Not only have you given up the holiday at home with family and friends. You have come here when Congress is not in session, the cherry blossoms are not quite in bloom, and the President will not be throwing out the first baseball of the season because Washington no longer has a team.

I can only conclude that you have come because this conference gives you an unparalleled opportunity to renew professional friendships, assess on-going projects, and, most important, analyze the progress and problems in educational research -- to see where you are and where we -- all of us together -- need to go. That's a very important mission indeed for the future of American education. I welcome you to the Nation's capital, and I wish you every success in your deliberations over the next 4 days.

I thank you for the opportunity to be your keynote speaker, especially since you have chosen "Education and the Public Interest" as your conference theme.

I am convinced that the public is more interested than ever before in just about everything that has to do with education. As taxpayers

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and as parents, the public feels it had better take a hand in an enterprise that so directly affects their pocketbook and their children's education. The public is interested in the costs of education -- costs that have gone up 10 percent in the past year alone.

The public is interested in how education is managed. What it offers students in intellectual development, social awareness, and career orientation. How it teaches these fundamentals while allowing for the wide differences in student abilities, interests, and aspirations. How it handles such issues as sex education, drug abuse, textbook selection, and desegregation. And, finally, what it is doing, through research and development, to improve performance in all of these interrelated elements of the learning process, from a cost standpoint and from an academic standpoint.

The questions being asked are getting harder to answer, and we still have a great distance to travel if the needs of the users are to be served.

This heightened public interest in education is not a passing thing. It is not something that will taper off even when the economy improves and people become less concerned about what their tax dollars will buy. Consumer activism is here to stay. We see proof of it every day in class action cases in the courts, in testimony before congressional committees, in greater public involvement in State and local issues, even in picket lines outside the White House and State capitols. Education is a natural focal point for this activism.

Virtually every citizen is involved in education, first as student, later as parent and taxpayer. When it comes to this enterprise which so affects our lives, and livelihoods, an enterprise that is largely tax supported and as close to us as the neighborhood school or community college, the public intends to get involved and stay involved. It is astute of you to recognize this major new force in education and to build your sessions this week around "Education and the Public Interest."

I would like to paraphrase your theme slightly and address myself to "Educational Research and the Public Interest." I think this appropriate since AERA represents most of the research community, and I don't often get the opportunity to talk with so many of you at once. More important, it is pretty obvious by now that the potential of research and development for serving education and the public is enormous.

The key word, of course, is "potential." We are not there yet. If you have an image problem with the general public -- and, at least to some degree, you do have one -- it is because the potential of R. & D. got 'way out ahead of its ability to deliver some 10 or 15 years ago, and the delivery system is still running considerably behind.

There are legitimate reasons for this.

Education R. & D. is a young science, for one thing, still finding its way, still somewhat uncertain about its mission and theater of operation. What research is appropriate and what is not? Where does research

end and development begin? Which critical issues in education merit priority? What, for that matter, is the learning process, and how does it work for each student?

Moreover, education R. & D. is an inexact science. NASA can launch a Mariner satellite and calculate by precise mathematical formula that 2 years later it will orbit Mercury. You are not so fortunate. Your science deals with people, and we have to recognize that data about people will never be so definitive. Your studies will never be conclusive. You will never be able to show that this one approach to education will orbit young people in 2 years -- or ever.

But there are some things you can do, not only to meet the general public's expectations but also to establish a more productive relationship with the "users" -- the decision makers who finance your research or decide whether schools are going to use your findings.

These decision makers include the members of Congress, of State legislatures and others who control the purse strings and who must support your studies of school administration, financing, personnel practices, teacher training, and curriculum. They include school boards and school administrators who must determine which products of your research will become integral parts of their administrative approach or academic program. They include teachers, who need to understand why new programs are introduced and how to teach them.

Students and parents are also part of the decision making process, for they ultimately must accept the new teaching methods or curriculum materials as better or at least more relevant than the old.

Of course this relationship with so many decision making groups has to be a two-way street. Legislators, school boards, administrators, teachers, students, parents -- all must understand that the research community is not able to bring about lasting innovation and reform in education without their cooperation and support. Research needs to make a special effort to help these publics understand the need for and the nature of every study to be undertaken.

Let me mention a few of the specific things I think the research community can do to improve this relationship all around.

First, put priorities on your research. In the 1960's it was relatively easy to get a Federal grant. If you want a Federal grant today, you had better take Federal education priorities into account -- and be sure your priorities match them. Congress is playing a stronger hand in specifying our priorities.

In those earlier days, there was a tendency to study some things of peripheral value to education because lots of grant money was available. There wasn't much coordination of effort among researchers or exchange of information or identification of priorities. Some glamorous subjects were over researched. Some less exciting ones, though important, were given minimal attention.

In view of present constraints on research funds, the research community needs to target the more critical issues in education.

For example, we really don't know what compensatory programs have accomplished despite 10 years' experience and billions of dollars invested in ESEA Title I, Follow Through, Headstart, and similar efforts. How do disadvantaged children benefit from such add-ons? How are their learning skills enhanced?

We don't know, and so it was that I was delighted when Congress mandated, in the Education Amendments of 1974, a study of Title I and Follow Through and other Federal compensatory education programs. As you may know, the National Institute of Education has an appropriation of \$5 million for each of 2 years to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of these programs. This study is urgently needed.

Congress created the National Institute of Education in 1972 to serve as the focal point for Federal research and development in education. The intent of Congress was to give education the same kind of research and development capability that the physical sciences have long had through the National Science Foundation and that health research has had through the National Institutes of Health.

Like any new organization, NIE has had its problems, some of them serious, but it has made a promising start toward resolving them. I believe NIE will live up to its congressional mandate and provide us with the research focus and the quality of research standards we need. NIE merits the support of the R. & D. community, and I am confident that it will more than justify your support in the next few years.

While I am sure that Emerson Elliott, the Institute's acting director, will fill you in tomorrow, let me just mention NIE's other

priorities for fiscal year 1976. They include research in four areas -- children's reading comprehension; school finance, productivity, and management; education and work; and equity in the opportunity for education -- plus a tripling of funds for dissemination.

I think NIE and Office of Education priorities complement one another quite well. NIE's education and work priority, for example, provides the necessary research base for OE's developmental effort in career education. And both agencies are committed to equality of opportunity for all students....this has long been a Federal priority and will continue to be in the immediate future.

The Office of Education also has some priorities that NIE does not, and this serves to broaden the Federal commitment. We have research authority in vocational education and in education for the handicapped. The emphasis, of course, is on close relationship with on-going practice. Both types of education will get priority attention, from a research standpoint and from a programmatic standpoint. In addition, OE will be giving special attention to bilingual education, adult education, international education, and more comprehensiveness in the comprehensive high school. (The high school, incidentally, is going to be the center of a newly intensified struggle in education over the next 3 to 5 years.)

The second thing that I think research can do is to study real world issues. I don't imply that this is neglected--but recent fire leveled at NIE sharpens the need. An international organization developed a public image problem some years back when it spent



a considerable sum to study the societal uses of the umbrella in various cultures around the world. A U.S. Government agency had a similar problem after it released a research report suggesting that ripe tomatoes will squash flatter if you drop them eight feet rather than four. These comments about these research efforts may be unfair. I am reporting on what the press had to say about them. But we must remember that education R. & D. must build a constituency that comes from effective public information.

I am not suggesting that we do away with theoretical or esoteric inquiry. Like the physical sciences, education needs studies that explore why the grass is green. I am suggesting that a greater balance is needed between theoretical issues and those issues for which schools urgently need answers right now.

Radio was hailed 50 years ago as a classroom tool of unlimited promise, but that promise was never realized. Now television offers even greater promise, yet we have not developed a systematic way to use it to its fullest potential. We also need research on school size. What size is most cost effective and most conducive to student learning? We need research on how women and minorities can be more adequately represented, without resorting to quotas, in school administration and on college faculty. These are the kind of issues that the research community needs to anticipate in order to get a headstart on the demand for answers.

Much of the problem could be solved if greater efforts were made to include users in the initiation and early stages of conceptualiza-

tion. Too often R. & D. comes from the cloistered environs of colleges, universities, and organizations, and is imposed on schools. This is as much the fault of the practitioner world as of the R. & D. community. School administrators must be reaching out to colleges, universities, laboratories, and R. & D. centers.

Survey forms, test instruments, and other printed data fed through a computer are no substitute for daily exposure to the issues facing school people. Whether you are investigating school finance, desegregation patterns, or student achievement problems, it is important to live and work in the environment you are studying. Margaret Mead pointed the way with her anthropological approach in Samoa 40 years ago. I think this approach should be more widely used in education today.

The third thing that I would like to see you do is to structure your research design in an appropriate time frame. The research community is under considerable pressure from decision makers, especially legislators, to provide instant answers in areas of investigation that just don't lend themselves to instant answers. Most research takes time. Giving in to these pressures will likely produce cursory research and simplistic recommendations.

The other extreme is the investigation that goes on for many years and finally produces a report that suggests more research is needed. Certainly some subjects require in-depth, long-term investigation. But in many instances school people cannot wait 5 to 10 years for your recommendations, and so they make decisions without them. What I am

suggesting is that you take a realistic approach to the design of your study and let users know the time it will take to complete it.

My fourth, and final, recommendation to you is that you write concise reports that school people can understand. At the dedication of the Gettysburg cemetery the noted orator Edward Everett spoke at great length. Abraham Lincoln took only 250 words to evoke the sacrifice endured by both sides in the Civil War and to issue an eloquent plea for preservation of the Union. Later Everett wrote Lincoln: "I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes."

I find it useful to recall this episode at times, particularly when I am trying to digest a voluminous report or memorandum or position paper. Too often an investigator starts his report with 200 pages of description of methodology and avenues of investigation that went nowhere and some other avenues that looked promising. Research findings would have a more significant place in school decision making if recommendations came early, and in clear and simple English.

How a study was conducted is important, certainly, and those avenues that went nowhere are important to record for other investigators who may want to build on your work. But for busy decision makers -- be they State legislators or superintendents or school board members -- it's essential that a report deliver its message clearly and concisely.

Let me sum up by throwing some questions into the hopper for consideration during your seminars, panel discussions, and general sessions over the next 4 days.

First, what needs to be done to enhance public acceptance of education R. & D. as a legitimate science capable of making contributions?

Second, what is the most practical way to arrive at some consensus as to research priorities so that limited funds can be aimed at the most critical issues and not spent on fragmented efforts?

Third, how can the research community obtain on-going financial support so that areas of investigation are not determined solely by the availability of short-term Federal and foundation grants?

Fourth, how can you respond effectively to pressures from decision makers for immediate answers without contaminating the research design?

Finally, there is the problem of evaluating what is discovered and sharing it with the people who need to know. Lawrence Cremin summed up the dilemma well in his inaugural address as president of Columbia University Teachers College. He said that our testing instruments "tell us little about where anything in particular has been learned, about the relationship between what is learned in one institution and what is learned in another, about how different individuals synthesize what they have learned in various institutions, and about what might be the best possible combinations of institutions for teaching different things."

Thus, I conclude with a basic question: What can investigators do to improve internal channels of communication, among themselves, and external channels of communication, to decision makers?

These kinds of questions not only need serious discussion here. They warrant thoughtful consideration over the longer term in academic communities, school systems, State legislatures, and State departments of education and by parents. For they involve basic issues that have to do with the future of education research and development and the future of education itself.

I am confident there are answers. I am confident that R. & D. will meet its responsibilities to education and to the public. I believe we will look back a decade from now and realize that the science of measuring and evaluating how and why human beings learn has indeed come of age.

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